

Program Evaluation

Questions to Consider when Implementing Research/Evaluation Services

Gathering data through research or evaluation activities is an important part of any program, service, or process. The goal is often to understand what works, how does it work, and/or what is the impact on the target audience or organizational system.

Tips To Consider When Collecting Data

NOTE: These tips are not exhaustive, but equally apply whether data is collected “in house” by a VA office or “externally” by a VA contractor/vendor.

1. What is it that you want to “know” from the data being collected? What purpose will the data serve (e.g., show change, for benchmarking, indicate frequency of use, etc.)?

Understanding what the data are for and what you want to know about your program, service, or process is the first step in conceptualizing an evaluation or research plan. Asking these questions will also inform the type of data you need and how to obtain it. Here is a list of things that VA offices often want to “know” about their data and “how” they will use it:

<i>Types of Evaluation</i>	<i>General Concept</i>	<i>Additional Explanation</i>
Process	Think “the pathway taken to complete the work”	This is a review of the <u>steps</u> or <u>milestones</u> needed to implement the program (e.g., planning, recruitment, material development, evaluation tools, etc.). It is an ‘internal’ measure of whether the program was implemented as planned, on-time, within budget, etc. The results can help improve (or change) the next program implementation. Think of this as your ‘lessons learned.’
Outputs	Think “how much did the program do/achieve”	This evaluation often provides a <u>count</u> measure (e.g., # of surveys taken or materials produced, or a frequency/mean score of what the target audience knows or perceives). It is an ‘external’ measure used in final reports. This is a simple evaluation strategy to report “how much” was done.
Outcomes	Think “the impact of the program on the intended audience/client”	This evaluation is a <u>statistical</u> measure of relationships (e.g., as Service X increases, so does Outcome Y). It is an ‘external’ measure used in final reports. This is a more complex evaluation technique, but very informative. It requires knowledge of research/statistics. This evaluation strategy reports if your program “makes a difference.”
ROI and Cost-Benefit	Think “what is the benefit or financial return from this program”	This is a <u>financial</u> (and statistical) evaluation of the program’s outputs and/or outcomes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>ROI</u> = Return on Investment. <i>Ex: Improved service reduces VA backlog saving \$XX million in costs.</i> • <u>Cost-Benefit</u> = A performance outcome; may not be monetized. <i>Ex: Improved service increases teamwork.</i> (NOTE: While <i>teamwork</i> cannot be monetized directly, it may be linked indirectly to financial benefits, such as reduced turnover which has a \$XX cost savings).

2. What steps will you need to obtain the data?

This is a big question to consider, since the end result of research and evaluation is to obtain useful data that informs on some element(s) of the program, service, or process.

Here are several steps to consider in obtaining data.

a. What data are needed?

You must first answer Question 1 above – what do you want to “know”? This will help determine the type of data you need.

- Look to existing VA data: VA collects a wide range of output and outcome data through existing surveys (e.g., VA All Employee Survey, Safety Survey, etc.) and regular counts/tallies (e.g., HR Onboard and Turnover Employees). Ask around your department, look at the VA ProClarity Data Cube, or ask NCOD for insight on existing metrics related to what you want to know. Data may already be available.
 - The most accessible VA data are ‘aggregate’ (i.e., facility- or workgroup-level); see ProClarity: <http://training.vssc.med.va.gov/Pages/ProClarityDesktop.aspx>. Contact the VA office of interest to inquire about the ‘server name’ or ‘cube address’ of their data in the ProClarity system.
 - Alternatively, if you prefer ‘raw’ data (i.e., individual-level), please contact the VA office of interest. You may need to submit a Data Use Agreement (DUA), which requires an additional level of approval, a secure place of storage, a data use plan or research protocol, and skills in statistical analysis. DUAs often take a little time to secure, so plan this into your evaluation timeline.
- Develop your own questions/inquiries: You may have specific questions to ask about your training program or about client satisfaction with a new process. If so, you may need to develop your own data instrument/questions.
 - For VA offices, the NCOD Survey Team is available to provide consultation on data instruments/questions. All such requests must first be approved by NCOD Senior Leadership. NCOD considers each program office to be its own expert on its area of inquiry (“what to know”), so offices should first develop a list of questions they want to explore and NCOD can provide insight on clarifying or rewording questions to improve utility. *NCOD will also extend a limited version of this service to contractors working with VA offices primarily by offering ‘best practices’ guidance on VA survey processes.*

b. If new data are being collected, what data tool is needed?

If you are collecting your own data, potential data tools might include:

- Survey data (e.g., pre-post learning survey, satisfaction survey, etc.)
 - Surveys allow for open (e.g., text comment) or closed (e.g., A, B) responses.
 - Collection options: web-based, telephone, paper.
 - *Who is your target audience?* Some VA occupations do not have regular computer access for web-based surveys (e.g., NCA, WG staff).
 - *Who will collect the data?* If focus groups or interviews (in-person, telephone, video), do you have the staff/resources to collect this data? If surveys, do you have a secure server?
- Focus groups/Key Informant Interviews (e.g., discussion with program users)
 - Collection options: in-person, telephone, videoconference.
 - *Who will collect the data?* If focus groups or interviews (in-person, telephone, video), do you have the staff/resources to collect this data?

- Document Studies (e.g., chart reviews, contract/record reviews, etc.).
 - *NOTE:* Review of patient charts or contracts may require additional HIPPA notifications and security protocols. Consult the VA office of interest.

c. *How will data be collected and stored to meet VA privacy and security standards?*

VA maintains strict policies to ensure the safety and privacy of its data. This includes how data are collected, stored, and transferred using security encryption processes.

General Overview of Electronic Collection/Storage of VA Data		
<i>References: VA Handbook 6310 and 6102, and VA Office of Information Security (OIS)</i>		
NOTE: These tips are <i>not exhaustive</i> . VA offices should contact their Information Security Officer (ISO) for verification of data safety and security – including review of VA contractor data protocols.		
	VA Office	VA Contractor
Security Standards	Electronic data must be stored on a government computer within the VA firewall (e.g., S:/ or M:/ drives).	Electronic data must be stored in compliance with VA security standards either on a VA or the contractor server (<i>consult the VA program office's ISO</i>).
Data Collection Resources	Commercial web-based services (e.g., SurveyMonkey) are not to be used to collect personally identifiable information (PII) on VA employees or for any external audiences (e.g., Veterans). Use of commercial web-based services must be approved for their ability to satisfy VA security protection (i.e., maintain security similar to VA firewall). Contact your VA office ISO for approval.	
	VA maintains these secure data collection tools for VA Offices within the VA firewall: <u>Inquisite</u> (VA office can self-use): http://vaww1.va.gov/surveylicracker/ <u>Vovici</u> (provided by HTM and NCOD): http://vaww.htm.wmc.va.gov/km/vv/default.aspx	VA contractors may use their internal ('self-hosted') or an external commercial licensed ('hosted') data collection site provided the site meets VA security standards (<i>refer to the VA program office's ISO</i>).
Data Ownership	VA owns all data collected on its behalf. Data must be stored for the required period under VA security protocols (refer to your annual TMS VA Information and Security training for updates).	VA retains full ownership of all data collected on its behalf. Return all data to VA program office for storage.

d. *If new data are being collected, what else do you need to know?*

- 508 Compliance. Electronic survey tools must meet 508 compliance – see "Checklists" under <http://vaww.section508.va.gov>
- Union Notification. Data collection targeted to specific union-protected groups (e.g., nurses, service staff, etc.) OR comprising VA-wide/census surveys will require union notification. Contact the VA Labor-Management Relations Office. (NOTE: Unions require 30 days notification prior to the survey start date. Notification must include the final survey instrument, administration dates, target audience, assurances the data will remain anonymous and confidential, the survey will be voluntary, and results will be shared with union officials upon request.)
- OASC Coordination. Data collection targeted toward more than one VISN/Network, a specific VHA service line (e.g., nurses), or more than 20% of all employees nationally requires coordination through the OASC Steering Committee (contact OASC through NCOD at VHANCOD@va.gov or 513-247-4680).

3. What data analysis tools and resources are available?

VA program offices have ready access to Microsoft Excel for use of “count” and basic “statistical” analyses. The TMS website maintains a wide range of Excel analytic training opportunities from in-person *Analytics Boot Camp* to self-led *Advanced Data Management*. Alternatively, for more experienced investigators with graduate-level or research-related training, VA’s VINCI website maintains a wide array of statistical analytic tools – SAS, SPSS, Stata, etc. for data analysis. Both VA employees and VA contractors (with a VPN account) can request access to VINCI to upload their data (behind a second VA firewall) and use the analytic software: <http://vaww.vinci.med.va.gov/vincicentral/default.aspx>

NOTE: The VINCI site also has Excel and other useful software programs (e.g., Adobe Professional) so that both VA employees and VA contractors (with a VPN account) can access this site for shared data analysis and reporting.

4. What are your plans for reporting your findings?

Whether your data are collected ‘internally’ by VA program office staff or ‘externally’ by VA contractors, VA is committed to data accuracy and transparency in reporting its results.

Here are several tips to facilitate data accuracy and transparency in your reporting:

- Provide information on your sample.
 - *Who was assessed?* --VHA nurses, Senior Executives (SES), all VA staff.
 - *How many participated?* -- Response Rate = Total Respondents / Total Sample.
- Discuss your evaluation method.
 - *How were the data obtained?* -- Survey (web, paper, telephone, or existing dataset--ProClarity), Focus Group/Key Informant Interview (in-person, telephone, videoconference), etc.
 - *What was your data collection tool?* – Share your survey instrument or focus group questions. If you used an existing dataset (e.g., VA All Employee Survey), provide the variable name or question/description.
 - *When were the data collected?* -- Provide the year or time period of the data.
- Be transparent with your results.
 - *It is important to report all results – positive, negative, and neutral.* Positive results can certainly highlight program strengths, but negative and/or neutral results also provide insight on future action items, as well as lessons learned.
 - *Results should be clear enough and provide enough detail (who, when, what), so that others can replicate (and verify) your work.*
- Develop clear and informative graphics/tables.
 - *Graphics may often be the few ‘results’ that people look at, so ensure your graphics provide enough details to ‘stand alone’ from your report.*
 - *Example graphic title:* Figure 1. Pre-Post Learning Scores following Employee Training. Data: Evaluation Survey, 2012, N = 324 managers/supervisors.
 - *Graphics should also include the scale and variable names, if relevant.*
Training Effectiveness = 1: Strongly Disagree, 5: Strongly Agree.
- Plan the timeline and staff to implement the report(s).
 - *Plan how the results will be shared* (i.e., who will have access to the results and the responsibility for disseminating the results within VA, if applicable).

Questions?

Please direct questions to NCOD at VHANCOD@va.gov or 513-247-4680 (ET). You can also see our website: Intranet <http://vaww.va.gov/NCOD> and Internet <http://www.va.gov/NCOD>